The Lighthouse Electronic Magazine Article

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From Nashville to Wichita to New Mexico ... Step By Step
Kathy Sanders
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Like most of you, I distinctly remember the first time I heard a Rich Mullins song; it was almost 20 years ago. August 19th, 1975, the first night of Freshmen Orientation at Cincinnati Bible College, I sat in the midst of over 100 other people who felt as scared and alone as I when the concert began. A rather shaggy looking character, just 18 years old, with torn jeans (against the dress code) and bare feet (Heavens!) sat down at a rickety piano and spun tales of faith and wonder with music that I knew even then called for a much wider audience. Mullins and I became friends first and later "family" through nearly 2 decades of teaching, working, and laughing together - through the thousands of miles on the road that eventually led 5 of us to Wichita over 6 years ago.

Later this month [May '95] Mullins will leave Wichita for New Mexico. In the midst of the chaos we both call our lives, we sat down to do a legitimate interview about the changes that are coming in his life and why he finds it difficult to leave this river city. We settled down on the floor of my office to get serious.

Kathy Sanders: Why teach? And why teach music? And why teach music to Navajo children?

Rich Mullins: I am a teacher. It's who I am, the calling that God built in to me. And our calling defines both who we are and what we do. I come from a long line of teachers - my granddad and others in my family. Even though my dad was not a formal teacher, teaching was still a large part of who he was and continues in me. I want to teach music because I love people more than music, but I know the power of music. I know that all people, especially kids, can win at music. Life lessons are learned in music... it's like all the practicing musicians do, most of practice involves being willing to fail. When you have finally made all the mistakes you can, you succeed! You can't do anything else but succeed!

Music is powerful; people - even those who think they can't sing - respond to music. I want to pass that on to young people. They'll be surrounded by music all of their lives, I'd like to open the doors of good music to them - teach them to listen with some discernment.

KS: And the Navajos?

RM: They first interested me because they are a shepherding people. So much of the Bible was written to or from people who were a part of that life. It's a culture I want to learn to know. Also, I'm nearly 40 and still single. You know, there is little point in being single if you don't take advantage of some of the more positive points of singleness, like being able to move to a remote place to teach. And I don't want to wake up old someday never knowing anything about life other than living in middle class America.

KS: You have a new project out in the fall. I've heard a lot of working titles for it - Songs, Too Many Chiefs and Not Enough Native Americans, Quoting Deuteronomy to the Devil - what in the world are you going to call this thing?

RM: [Laughter] Believe it or not, we're just gonna name it after one of the songs, Brother's Keeper. We took a different approach in this album and it was great - and scary. The album is very - well - raw. We didn't worry as much about being eloquent or poetic as getting real things said in real ways. I have alot of good memories about the writing of this project... Most of it was written on Beaker's [Rich's partner] porch or in my teepee or Les and Kay Arvin's farm outside Wichita. It's family oriented; 2 of the band members became fathers during the writing and 2 of the songs are about those children. Three of the band members wives' sang on the project and all of that together made for a different and somehow more grounded feeling to "Brother's Keeper." I'm looking forward to touring the project this fall.

KS: Yet another of the "this-is-the-last-time-we-swear-it Rich Mullins tours?" There have been a few...

RM: [Harder Laughter] We could call it the "Yet Another Rich Mullins Farewell Tour - #5 In A Series Of 10."

KS: You are leaving Wichita and I know you have loved living here. What do you love most? What will be the hardest to leave?

RM: First of all, I love Friends University and Central Christian Church - what great places. I love the political action in this city. I love that people are willing to debate hard issues and that the Church in Wichita is willing to take difficult stands. I have been so impressed with the ways the churches cooperate and that people like Doris Howard and High School Ministry Network can help bring down denominational and racial walls with things like Locker 2 Locker - those issues just didn't matter then. It's also incredible to live in a city that has a radio station like Light 99 FM and see the good it brings to the whole Christian community. There are a lot of people doing quietly amazing things in this city. But, I guess

for me personally, the greatest part about the time I've been here in Wichita is that there was a whole group of people here who knew me for exactly who I am and still accepted me and loved me. There are two very important things you can say to special people in your life - it should be engraved on my tombstone: forgive me, and thank you.

(Sanders has been co-host of the morning show at Light 99 FM in Wichita for four years.)

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